

OFFICE HAZARDS EXPOSED

Offices can be hazardous environments to work in on a daily basis, with some of the risks coming from sources you would never suspect. JOHANNA BAKER-DOWDELL investigates

HAZARD 1 STRESS

Why PAs are at risk: Colleen Rowe from Workable Living in Herston, Queensland, says stress is a major health hazard for PAs. "Stress principally comes from our interactions with our co-workers and time and output pressures," she explains.

Symptoms: Productivity loss and physical and emotional illnesses, such as depression.

Prevention: Take more care with your physical and emotional wellbeing, identify negative attitudes that add to your stress and improve your communication skills for better workplace relationships.

HAZARD 2 EMF (ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD) EXPOSURE

Why PAs are at risk: PAs are exposed to EMF in the office every day through electrical equipment, such as office machines, switch boards, security system control panels or power lines outside the office, and radio frequency exposure from mobile phone masts on buildings, explains Marianne Baker from Building Wellness in Croydon, Victoria. "What nobody thinks about is the impact of wireless internet as that can cause higher radio frequency exposure in an office than phone masts on nearby buildings," she says.

Symptoms: Concentration difficulties, dizziness, loss of memory, headaches, ringing in the ears, sleep disturbance, depression, fatigue, weakness, immune suppression.

Prevention: "Photocopiers, printers and fax machines should be located away from people's desks, in a separate room which is vented to the outside," recommends Marianne.



HAZARD 3 POOR EATING HABITS AND OBESITY

Why PAs are at risk: *50 Steps to Lose 50kg... And Keep it Off* author Sally Symonds says a major office health hazard is obesity, which could affect a PA's productivity, wellbeing, job satisfaction and even career progression. "Overweight employees are more likely to take sick leave, earn an average 2.5 per cent less than their normal weight counterparts, and even have a lower net worth than those with a BMI in the normal range. They're also more likely to be overlooked for promotions and less likely to stay employed and work for longer," says Sally.

Symptoms: Breathlessness, sleeping difficulties, trouble with physical activity, feeling tired, back and joint pain and chronic disease such as diabetes and heart disease.

Prevention: Dr Leon Massage from the Body Metabolism Institute understands that many PAs don't want to feel left out at office celebrations so take a piece of cake or a biscuit, or meet colleagues for coffee and have an unhealthy snack with it. "Plan ahead and think about what you're eating and bring your food with you. Pool together with a group in the office and buy vegetables and fruit to make salads" he recommends.

HAZARD 4 POOR WORKSTATION SET UP

Why PAs are at risk: Poor workstation ergonomics is the common cause for work-related musculoskeletal injuries, Brisbane exercise physiologist and nutritionist Courtney Hargrave explains.

Symptoms: "Simply having your office chair too low or your keyboard too far away can lead to lower back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome or acute neck pain," he says.

Prevention: Position your computer screen arms distance away and set the height to see the top 1/3rd of the screen; have your keyboard and mouse as close to your body as possible and keep your phone on the left hand side, or buy a head set. Set your office chair so your arms are at 90 degrees when your hands are on the keyboard and adjust the backrest so you are comfortably upright and have lumbar support in the curve of your lower back.

HAZARD 5 POSTURE

Why PAs are at risk: Angus Pike from the Chiropractor Association of Australia (CAA) Victoria believes that office workers are suffering with posture problems traditionally associated with the elderly. "When it comes to spinal health, we are getting older much earlier," he says.

Symptoms: Increased forward head posture, round shoulders and forward pelvis and slouching.

Prevention: Take a break and go for a walk. The CAA Just Start Walking initiative features a free downloadable mobile phone app www.juststartwalking.com.au to get you started. ■